

Case Studies in Education

By Meral Güçeri and Ann Riddell Akin

The case study method has been widely used in education as a learning vehicle with specific educational objectives in mind. It has been highly popular in many disciplines such as economics, social sciences, psychiatry, and engineering, where the skills of unstructured and complex problem solving are involved. Case studies have also been welcomed by EFL professionals, especially by those who are involved in teaching ESP and EOP in the Departmental English courses at Baskent University English Language School and the English Language Support Unit (ELSU) of Bilkent University School of English Language. This article aims to describe how case studies are used when teaching ESP.

The word "case" comes from Latin casus. Some of the dictionary definitions from Collins Cobuild which fit into this context are "1. 1. A particular situation that you are considering on its own or on an individual basis, especially when you are using it as an example of something, or when you are comparing it with something else. 1. 2. A particular incident that you are describing or explaining."

Cobuild also defines "Case Study," which is spelled with or without a hyphen, as: "An account that gives detailed information about a person, group, or thing and their development over a period of time...."

Case studies used in particular educational institutions describe problems of individuals, couples, groups, social institutions, or even nations (Easton 1982). For this reason they are highly popular in ESP and EOP.

Why Case Studies?

Case studies provide students with the opportunity of reading, understanding, and discussing a specific problem area. Students are expected to propose logical solutions to the problem presented. Each case is written to leave the student at a decision point with the manager in the case confronted. It will usually describe how the current position developed and what problems key personalities in the case are currently facing. Tables of data, diagrams, and photographs may be added to help provide a more complete picture. Appendices are normally used to include large amounts of data that would otherwise clutter the text. Film, video, audiotapes, and slide sequences have all been used as vehicles for case descriptions. These all make a case more realistic to the students. They force students to decide on an action under realistic conditions. Students cannot remain passive observers, but are trained to be action-oriented and decisive.

Lane and DiStefano (1992) define a case as a description of a situation faced by a decision-maker. The case method has been found as an extremely effective method of accelerating management development.

Skills Developed Through Case Studies

Learning to listen to each other, respecting others' views on the same subject, as learning when and how to react and to handle information are some of the basic skills which are developed through case studies. As a result, students develop their analytical skills. They also practise applying concepts, techniques, and principles in analysis. They learn how to judge which techniques are appropriate and applicable, to plan communication, and to analyse values. In addition, students learn to use creativity in generating alternative solutions to the problems.

How Students Respond to Case Studies

The case method cannot be considered as either tutorial or lecturer-based. Therefore, many students find the method difficult to adapt to. Critical thinking, creativity, communication skills, as well as attitude, self-analysis, social skills, and decision-making skills are all involved.

Easton (1982) proposes the following several steps for case analysis:

1. Understanding the situation
2. Diagnosing problem areas
3. Generating alternative solutions
4. Predicting outcomes
5. Evaluating alternatives
6. Rounding out the analysis
7. Communicating the results

Students are highly recommended to follow the above steps to be able to cope well with a case study. However, they usually complain about the shortage of time and lack of information, which also applies to a real-life situation and they cannot tolerate ambiguity.

Fully understanding the situation and also diagnosing the problem is difficult for students. They have the tendency to propose only one solution to the problem instead of putting forward several. Students need to be encouraged to propose more than one solution and to learn how to tolerate or accept the solutions offered by others. Any solution may have a cumulative effect or will have some implications, which need to be considered carefully as well. When students are asked to analyse the case completely and evaluate alternative solutions, they usually get impatient and want the single right answer, which does not exist in real life. Because students fear the criticism of others, they are reluctant to communicate their results.

Role of Instructor

The role of the instructor in case studies is crucial. The instructor is present to keep the discussion moving toward a meaningful goal with minimum intervention. His/her role is that of a

catalyst and to inspire analytical thinking. The instructor also tries to trigger students' alertness and their ability to defend an argument.

Much patience and tolerance is expected from the instructor to manage a case study successfully. However, it is worth every minute of it. Materials selection also plays an important role in achieving this. Tailor-made department-related case study materials design is one of the effective strategies which is used in ELSU. For example, Tourism and Hotel Management students study tourism and hotel management related cases, and Computer Technology and Programming Department students concentrate on cases which concern computer programmers. Students enjoy reading, understanding the issues, and offering solutions to the problems discussed as long as these concern their future career. Although it may take a couple of weeks' patience for the instructor, seeing a group of students discussing cases at the desired level is worth the effort and the time which is put in to achieve the end result.

Case Studies Materials: Selection, Adaptation, or Creation

When deciding which materials to include in our courses, various published case study EFL/ESP textbooks were examined. However, it soon became clear that most published case studies were unsuitable for our students, owing to the following issues:

- 1. Timing:** Courses provided by our unit are for either two hours or four hours per week. Many case studies appeared to be either too long or too short to fit in our timetable.
- 2. Culturally Specific:** Case study textbooks tend to be written by either British or American authors who tend to base case studies in their respective countries. As a result, case studies deal with companies, countries, and concepts that our students would have little previous knowledge of.
- 3. Level of Difficulty:** Most of our students are in the first year of their faculty. Many case studies, however, are aimed at experienced businessmen who may possess the necessary special or technical vocabulary. In addition, case study writers often presume that students are experienced and proficient in analysing cases.
- 4. Suitability of Tasks:** Case studies often contain a lot of figures and difficult mathematical calculations which may distract students from discussing the case. Students may also become demotivated by such tasks.
- 5. Topic:** Topics covered in case studies may be difficult or too technical for students. It is important that students are familiar with the topic to be discussed so that their schemata can be activated.
- 6. Course Objectives:** Where possible, case studies should be used to fulfill course objectives. They should, for example, revise or introduce relevant vocabulary.

As a result, teachers are left with two options. First, case studies from textbooks may be adapted so that the problems mentioned above can be eliminated. Alternatively, teachers may design their own cases. In fact, it soon became clear in our situation that it was simpler to develop our own cases, catering to our own students' particular needs and interests. The difficulty of case studies may also be graded so that cases introduced at the beginning of courses concentrate on developing students' speaking skills. As students become familiar with case studies, more emphasis can be placed on designing materials which concentrate on developing students' critical and analytical thinking skills.

Steps for Case Study Design

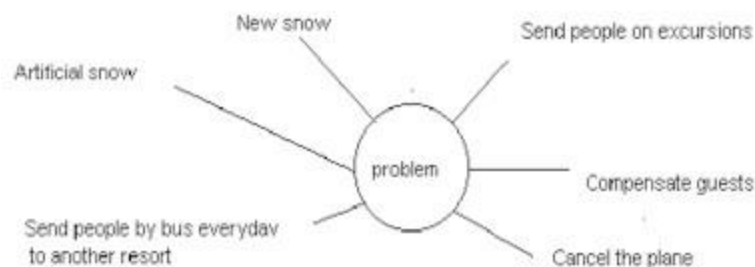
The following steps were drawn up to help teachers design case studies. Below is an example of designing a case for first-year tourism students.

CASE STUDY: TOURISM

1. Find or think of a problem that your students can relate to.

Problem: Imagine you are the manager of a ski resort. Today is Wednesday, and the snow in your resort is melting. The snow conditions are getting worse by the hour. Your guests are beginning to complain. On Saturday you are expecting a plane load of new guests. What will you do?

2. Mind-map solutions to the problem.



3. What is the optimum solution? Is there an optimum solution?

The best solution to the problem related above is probably to bus guests to another resort.

4. Are there any distracters or limitations to make the case more difficult to solve? (higher level students)

Weather forecast could be added showing that there will be no new snow.

For higher level student, budgets could be added.

5. What exhibits are required to provide the information needed to solve the case?

Exhibit 1: Weather forecasts showing no new snow Exhibit 2: Advertisements from a newspaper advertising artificial snow-makers Exhibit 3: A brochure from the local tourist office showing the excursions available in the area Exhibit 4: A local map with other nearby ski resorts

6. What information is required in each exhibit?

Exhibit 1: Weather report for Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday Prediction for the following week Exhibit 2: Details of prices of making artificial snow Details of how long it takes to make artificial snow Location of the company Exhibit 3: Prices of the excursions Details of which places are visited and their location Exhibit 4: Make sure location of artificial snow-maker, local ski resorts, and places mentioned in excursions are on the map

7. Which concepts and language need to be introduced or discussed before the case analysis begins?

The general topic of skiing could be a class discussion prior to introducing the case.

Vocabulary to be revised: resort and piste

After the material has been designed, the following checklist can be applied so as to ensure that the material will be suitable for your students.

Checklist

- Does the problem emulate a real-life situation?
- Is the problem something that students will be able to grasp?
- Are there at least three exhibits?
- Are the exhibits evident or do they need explaining?
- Are the exhibits real?
- Are the exhibits too explicit?
- Will the case provoke enough discussion?
- Are there a number of possible solutions?
- Is the case challenging?

By adhering to the case study design steps and using the checklist, case study materials can be designed quickly and efficiently for classroom use. Although case studies we design tend to be for ESP students, more general problems could act as a stimulus for designing cases for students learning general English.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1 provides a sample case analysis which has currently been used at Bilkent University, School of English Language, Tourism Department 3rd year English Language Support courses.

Too little snow on the slopes

Case description:

You are a Resort Manager of Snow Time Holidays in Uludag (skiing resort near Bursa). Unfortunately, the snow conditions for skiing are getting worse by the hour. The snow is melting, and you have had no fresh snow. It is Wednesday, and you are expecting a planeload of passengers to arrive on Saturday. You are a successful manager of Snow Time Holidays which has a good image and you should maintain it. With the solution you suggest to the problem above, make sure that there is not a possibility of negative knock-on effect.

Exhibit 1: Advertisement from the travel agency

Exhibit 2: A copy of the Snow Time holidays Terms of Contract

Exhibit 3: Daily weather forecast for that area

Exhibit 4: A reply letter of the Resort Manager of the Kartal Hotel (There are also several other exhibits for the course tutors to select.)

What will you do?

Task 1:

Read the case described carefully:
Analyse all the exhibits provided
and take notes to justify your
solution.

Describe the case to the other
members of the group to ensure
that you all have
understood the situation.

Suggest the best solution(s) to
handle the situation.

Task 2:

Read all the case material to find
out the facts by answering the
following questions:

1. What happened or what was done?
2. Who was involved?
3. How did things happen? (Cause of the problem)
4. How are events/things linked to one another?

Task 3:

Now, identify the issues.

Task 4: Propose alternative
solutions or courses of action to
solve the problem.

Task 5:

Propose alternative solution(s)
and argue for it (them) if
necessary.

Task 6:

Appoint a group spokesperson to

Task 7:

report the best solution(s)
discussed.
Submit the best solution to the
whole class for evaluation.

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